Unpacking and undoing 'the crisis': database activism for strange times

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Unpacking and undoing 'the crisis': database activism for strange times

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What is the role of social scientists (broadly defined) in times of crisis? How do we document, historicize, analyse and archive experiences at times of crisis? And how do we do it in a climate of anti-intellectualism on the one hand and information overload on the other? What might actually be meaningful in the long-run? Should we be creating new data or might there be a case to be made for pooling and organising existing scholarship? These are questions that have preoccupied us for some time now, starting with the so-called 'Greek crisis', and in response to which we set up 'to archeio/the archive project' which we discuss in this article.

Responding to crisis with a database

To archeio/the archive project and its first actions/interventions, the 'Greek Crisis Literature Database', came about in the summer of 2017, a couple of years after those heady early months of 2015, in which negotiations between the Greek government and the troika occupied the headlines both in Greece and abroad. Living through the crisis as well as watching the crisis from afar, as citizens and researchers, left us with a range of thoughts and emotions, not least of all problematising our own and others' impulse to respond in real time. Real time responses, we argued, could be understood as 'essays': attempts to make sense of new and unfolding realities in contexts of uncertainty where existing frameworks of understanding had been decimated. Over time, however, how many of these responses 'stick'? How many form part of future action? How many responses evolve into engaged scholarship? How might we contribute something lasting, meaningful and substantial?

The 'Greek Crisis Literature Database' was one response to these questions. The database contains references and links to the works of social scientists who have published their research on Greece over the last ten plus years. The original search carried out on Scopus using the search terms 'crisis' and 'Greece', returned around 550 articles, books, book chapters, reports, and other writing from the period between 2008 and 2018. It is currently organised by author, publication and date, with tags corresponding to author keywords, as well as tags created by 'the archive team' (currently the authors of this article) that loosely categorise the publications thematically. Included publications are English as well as Greek, and links are provided to institutional repositories, the authors' own webpage and other repositories where visitors might be able to download the articles. The original search that created the Greek Crisis Literature Database was bounded by the funds/time available for the work to be carried out by the third author. This means that the initial entry is partial and incomplete. As well as the

academic and grey literature reviewed, we also looked at artistic, activist and academic events and funding during that period (not currently archived). Prior to launching the database last spring, we emailed all authors whose work was included in the database and asked them to check their entries and send us any published research we missed. Most recently 56 new publications have been added to the database. Those who responded to our outreach have welcomed the initiative and we know from these communications that the database is being used for both teaching and research at the moment.

Databases, social scientists and activists

'A database is a structured set of data organized to facilitate information retrieval and searches' (Jue, 2020, p. 116). Databases are at the core of modern institutional and everyday life, gathering, organising, and making accessible the pieces of information that shape it. As researchers, we are surrounded by and adept at using as well as creating databases: library catalogues, online searches, Zotero libraries, SPSS and NVivo analyses. We are also regularly asked to populate databases for audit purposes (institutional research repositories). Here we will focus on the literature review as a database.

In most social sciences, creating a literature review is the first step of the research process. A survey of past ways of thinking and carrying out research on a given topic, the literature review is part of our academic development and of becoming experts in the field (Hart, 1998). In the clinical and applied social sciences, the literature review plays an iconic role: it is the (systematic) literature review that forms the backbone of clinical and practice guidelines in medical, health and social care in post-industrialised societies as well as in the majority world (e.g. Cochrane Review, Campbell Collaboration and Eldis). The intellectual endeavour of the literature review lies in the attempts to order its individual items, to tell a story out of them. It is that 'synthesis' and the imagination we use in creating a review database, as Juliette Singh argues, that keeps us 'tethered' to an increasingly precarious academia (Singh, 2018, p. 22). Yet, as Manovich (1999) pointed out over 20 years ago, databases represent the world as a list of items which refuse to be ordered. Before a literature review becomes a story, it is a list of texts selected for their relevance to a topic. So, why do many of these literature review *databases* remain with their creators and/or in the realm of discrete academic and professional communities of interest? (for an exception see this excellent public database on hope studies).

By contrast, in the worlds of activism, releasing a database to the 'wild' is, what we have called and practised elsewhere, a publics creating methodology. Using both face-to-face and online methods, a publics creating methodology is a set of practices aimed at connecting the cares and concerns of strangers that might otherwise remain private. So outside institutional structures of

higher education, databases have increasingly become central to activist practices on- and off-line (Milan et al 2018). Here the lines between databases and their older sibling 'the archive', become blurred. Databases such as Articipedia and Participedia, are open-access, crowdsourced/user-generated databases of creative activism on the one hand and public participation and democratic innovations on the other. Both databases are intended as resources for various activist practices for social change. Meanwhile, the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP), is a loose association of archivists, librarians, and allied professionals in the Philadelphia area who are responding to the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement by, amongst other things, creating an annotated bibliography for anti-racist archival description. The project addresses the finer details of database and archival practice namely metadata and encouraging anti-racist descriptions; an especially important consideration in predominantely white institutions where traditions of gathering, organising, and labelling can reinforce racist, sexist, ableist, ageist, and heteronormative information worlds.

Counter-public narratives of 'crisis'

In launching the Greek Crisis Literature Database, our wish was, and continues to be, to join others in the creation of counter-public narratives, informed by research and, at a later stage, artistic and other public interventions, which might support but also challenge key narrative tropes of the financial crisis. Our concern in creating the database was to disrupt and go beyond polarised and entrenched narratives of toxic political culture on the one hand and human suffering on the other, as well as the negative and often action-limiting emotional tone of those narratives (Tsogopoulos 2013; Kyriakidou 2014; Capelos and Exadaktylos, 2017). Life, afterall, during the period referred to as 'η κρίση' / 'the Greek crisis', continued to unfold, and we knew from our own research on families' everyday lives during this period, as well as our own experiences, that the ground was more uneven, more rugged, both beautiful and ugly, with ups as well as downs. At present, to archeio/the archive project is a work-in-progress. In the meantime, returning to our original intuitions for creating and releasing the Greek Crisis Literature Database, here are some things we have learnt in the process of getting to this point.

In constructing the database, we found that the essays and op-eds emerging from the social science community in the early days lacked empirical data and, especially, research on the ground that foregrounded people's lived experiences of the crisis (for some exceptions see 'everyday life' tag in the database). The literature on the Greek crisis contains more articles which, informed by an anthropological and sociological sensibility that we bring to the database's construction, we described as 'technical' pieces. These articles provide economic, political and policy analyses with little reference to people's everyday lives and lived

experiences through the crisis; they are analyses that focus far more on public life than they do on the personal and private lives that form the polis. Although most, if not all, of the 'technical' articles do not inform us about specific actors, they do help us to make sense of the different, complex ways in which "Greece in crisis" is called upon in the wider English-speaking scientific bibliography as a worst possible financial 'baseline' scenario against which the trajectory of other countries, also struggling with the global recession, is measured. In these more technical pieces, Greece figures as an anti-paradigm; she and her crisis emerge as a sick, ailing and out-of-control body, a gendered figuration of a woman-child ("γυναικόπαιδα") in need of parenting, rescue and resuscitation.

Furthermore, the 'crises' in 'Greece' returned by the Scopus search during the period of interest, were multiple: economic, political, migratory ('the refugee crisis'), as well as the crisis of values/rights/democracy, of citizenship, and of the environment. The geographical and temporal coalescing of different ruptures to everyday life and social structures suggests, on the one hand, that the 'Greek crisis' was far from monothematic; conversely, it also indicates a rise in 'crisis studies', a tendency to frame rapid economic and social change as 'crisis'. Given these multiplicities, and mindful of how categories shape experience, one of the actions we took as a team was to change the way we spoke about the topic. We tried to stop using the term 'Greek crisis' and instead began to make reference to 'the last ten years'. By removing 'the crisis' and opting for the slightly longer, clunkier and more historically inspired phraseology, we opened up the possibility of attending to experiences beyond that familiar trope. Moving from the singularity of crisis to the temporality of the last ten years helped us notice how stories of rapid economic and social change are told, sedimented, gathered, stored and accessed. Finally, and with a nod to an 'epistemology of the south', there was a case to be made that much of the research being carried out by colleagues in Greek institutions was not necessarily reaching either domestic or international publics.

'Protean' archives

The 'Greek crisis' database is one of an imagined array of future actions of to archeio/the archive project. In time, and funding permitting, our aim is to create a comprehensive, organised and searchable open, (a)live (Giannachi, 2016) and collaborative archive of economic and social life, of 'crises', and of social change over the past decade and more in Greece. Melody Jue (2020), who we cited earlier, refracting the database through the medium of the ocean, reminds us that objects immersed in saltwater change their original state over time; they are in this sense 'protean', they take a plurality of forms. This immersion is a disruption to our intentional acts as researchers in creating literature review databases to 'fix' our knowledge on a topic and to construct a narrative of 'crisis' (in this case), which individual researchers

'own'. It is also a reminder that databases require 'cultivation' to be kept alive. Finally, it is an invitation to take on different subject positions, those of curators (Ketalaar, 2009) and memory workers (Antoun, 2012), who in collaboration with database users (who we imagine as members of the public as well as other researchers), might engage in 'a process of refiguration' (Moss, 2008, p. 83) of the 'Greek crisis'. The archive it has been noted is 'a place of dreams' (Moss, 2008) as well as 'a space *and* time precisely so that we may find what is as yet unlived in our lives' (Giannachi, 2016). In this sense, the database and its archive home, are a methodology for collaboratively thinking through other possible worlds.

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